

Does God Answer Prayer?



Learning to live with God's silence.

By Mitch A. Schultz

I have a confession to make. I do this at the risk of drawing the attention of those who will suspect me of lacking faith, or, at best, of struggling spiritually. To convince you that this struggle actually comes from a position of strength and deepened faith might not be easy, but I am willing to try.

Ronald Dunn (be patient with me, I will get to this confession in a moment) in his classic book, When Heaven is Silent shines a light on a rarely visible side of faith, that side which grants us the provision of strength and depth when little seems to be happening in our Christian experience. According to Dunn, "faith is not necessarily the power to make things the way we want them to be; it is the courage to face things as they are".

With that in place I am ready now to come out of the closet with this confession. Here goes. As I look back over my life, particularly in the past several years, I cannot really say that I have seen any clear and direct answers to my prayers. When I say "clear and direct" I mean those answers that are directly and inarguably a result of my praying. I guess in a support group of those frustrated with unanswered prayer, I would be the first to stand and admit that I pray by faith not on the basis of evidence or outcome. I don't pray necessarily because I have seen things happen or because I expect things to happen. In other words, **I don't pray necessarily because I have seen prayer work.** Rather, there are two reasons I pray. First, because I am told to pray. I pray out of obedience. In Philippians 4:6 the Apostle Paul urged us with the following command to pray; "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God.*" (NIV). Furthermore, in Ephesians 6:18 Paul exhorts us to "*Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests...*" (NIV) Neither of these exhortations to pray is dependent upon outcome or response. God tells us to pray, and so we should pray.

The second reason I pray is because something deep inside me tells me that even though I don't often see results from my prayers, it is having what I call an *unseen affect.* I keep praying because I assume God hears and responds whether I see it or not. I will often

tell my friends that if the veil that covers the spiritual were lifted for us, we would be overwhelmed but what goes on in that dimension and how our prayers have somehow wonderfully contributed to it.

What I have offered above is a rational, theologically solid view of prayer. I hold to it often but not often enough. So what is my problem? Too often I stray from its moorings and I find myself floating aimlessly in a sea of frustration and cynicism. What I find frustrating is how my struggle against unanswered prayer occurs on a battlefield where testimonies of answered prayer by other warriors seem to make prayer look so easy and predictable.

Several years ago this frustration reached crisis proportions in my life. Our family spent ten months helplessly and desperately watching our oldest child suffer from an incurable brain tumor which ended up taking his life just shy of his 13th birthday. I pleaded with God to heal my son and I did so with confidence and conviction that I was praying to a prayer-answering God. Night after night I would end the routine of my day at his bed side and with my hand on his head and I prayed fervently. My prayers were met with mute silence.

Several days before our son died, I attended a prayer meeting at our local church. I needed the support and presence of my Christian brothers and sisters. Overwhelmed by God's silence, I sat in confused awe as I heard several give testimonies of God's miraculous provision. One dear lady shared how she had misplaced her wallet. She prayed, and just an hour later the wallet was recovered. God had answered her prayer. My groan was drowned by a number of affirming AMENS! It was that moment when I felt the most alone. God seemed a million miles away from me. And this nearly gave way to anger. I cried out to my Lord Jesus. Was he able to help someone find a lost wallet, but incapable of responding to my need? "*God*" I cried, "*are you the God who helps people find wallets, but not the God of brain tumors*"?

Through a recent study on Psalm 13 I have found King David to be a timely companion and welcome member of my support group for those struggling with unanswered prayer. Here David grants me permission to be frustrated, and here my Lord grants me some parameters to struggle over his silence. I find in Psalm 13 that the agony over God's apparent silence actually forms part of the foundation for a solid prayer life. Listen to David's cry from the heart and notice how brutally honest he was:

Long enough God. You've ignored me long enough. I've looked at the back of your hand long enough. Long enough I've carried this ton of trouble, lived with a stomach full of pain. Long enough my arrogant enemies have looked down their noses at me. Take a good look at me, God, my God. I want to look life in the eyes. So no enemy can get the best of me or laugh when I fall on my face. I've thrown myself headlong into your arms. I'm celebrating your rescue. I'm singing at the top of my lungs. I'm so full of answered prayers. (Psalm 13 The Message)

Many of my tears over unanswered prayer have landed on these potent words. Each tear magnifies more clearly that in the silence stands a gracious Lord who longs to hear from me. I wonder, even, if He is silent because he is weeping with me. *"The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit"* (Psalms. 34:18 NIV)

I find here that it is possible to live with God's silence and still grow and even keep praying. David did. God seemed a million miles away, but David still kept coming to God. It is in this that unanswered prayer has the effect of strengthening our prayer life. David did not struggle with God's existence. If he had, he would have stopped praying. People don't pour out their pain to one who is not there. Knowing God was there, (David's first assumption), David's struggle was over God's involvement, not His existence. He still needed God, whether God seemed there or not. I keep praying to God, even though he might seem absent simply because I know He is not. I know He hears me. I know my prayers

reach Him, and I know deep in my heart that my prayers also touch Him.

I discover also in this Psalm the comfort of knowing that I will not always have to keep praying like this. A day will come when we will all celebrate the end of unanswered prayer. Look again how David explains this:
*I've thrown myself headlong into your arms-
I'm celebrating your rescue. I'm singing at the top of my lungs, I'm so full of answered prayers.*

(Psalm 13:5-6 The Message)

In the end, when this is all over with, I will fall into the arms of the one who for years seemed so far away. All the years of groaning over his silence will seem to have been worth it for that embrace. It is in this promise that I find value in unanswered prayers. Groaning is good for us because it throws us to God. Even unanswered prayer has value because it increases my desire to see him face to face, and to finally hear his voice. It will be at that moment that we will understand that hard, frustrating and sometimes seemingly futile praying had been good for us and helped to prepare us for that wonderful moment. Jerry Sittser in his book; When God Doesn't Answer Your Prayer provides this insight into the value of answered prayer as it relates to our growing desire for God. *"Unanswered prayer can actually serve to fan the flame of spiritual desire to know God as the supreme end in life"*.

Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling. (2 Cor. 5:2 NIV)

*"...we ourselves ... groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies".
Romans 8:24 NIV)*

Finally, I find from this Psalm that **prayer is not about asking and receiving from God but rather it is about joining with God.** God doesn't seem so silent when I ask less of him. I am finding that God doesn't need my requests as much as he just wants my heart. Isn't it interesting in Psalm 13 that David only makes one request of God and that is for God to just pay attention to him? *"Look on me and answer me, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death"*. (NIV). There is no other request made in this Psalm. The rest of

the Psalm finds David just pouring out his heart to his Lord. I have begun to wonder if the reason why God seems silent to my requests is because by the very fact that I am asking for myself I become the focus of my need not Him. Jerry Sittser goes on to explain that *"we need unanswered prayer. It is God's gift to us because it protects us from ourselves. If all our prayers were answered, we would abuse its power"*.

Some months ago I decided to spend more time in prayer just talking to God, and less energy expecting anything from him. To my amazement he has become more real to me. I am not asking from God as much as I used to, but I am talking more to him. It doesn't matter to me as much that some prayers go unanswered. I can live with them knowing that what I really want is just to know he is with me. Yes, he is often silent. But I would rather have him silent and with me, than absent from me.

When Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, My God why have you forsaken me", his anguish was not over God's will. He had accepted what God was asking of him. His agony was over God's absence. Due to bearing all the sins of all mankind, God did, for a moment, abandon his Son. But what he did to his Son, he did so he would never have to do it to us. The cross tells me that God will never again turn his back on any of his sons or daughter. We have this confidence that he will never leave us, nor forsake us (Heb.13:5).

Is he silent? Yes, often he is. Does he care and is he with me? Oh, I can assure you he is. I can live with unanswered prayer. I just can't live without him.